

VIEWPOINT**Cinema and Construction of Identity:
Dr Rajkumar Phenomenon in Karnataka****ROOPA K.N****Abstract**

Aided by science and technology cinema has become a medium for entertainment, business, dialogue, propaganda, education, religion, and culture. The year 1954 becomes extremely important for Kannada cinema as there comes a turning point. The movie Bedara Kannappa starring S. P. MuthuRaj rechristened as Rajkumar by the film's producer Gubbi Veeranna was released. The movie created box office history gave a much needed boost to the ailing and struggling Kannada cinema. Rajkumar was to set the standards for both acting skills, sustenance and consolidation of the mass adulation that followed him. He was a product of theatre which nurtured and refined him. His impeccable voice complimented his acting. Another significant contribution has been introducing the best of Kannada literary works and poetry to the Kannada subaltern by their cinematic reproductions. Gradually, one sees the evolution of a least educated, rural, backward caste man becoming the symbol of Kannada, cultural icon and the identity of Kannada cinema.

Key Words: *Kannada Cinema, Culture, Rajkumar, Subaltern hero*

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INTRODUCTION

"The narrative and representational aspects of film make it a wholly unique form of art. Moreover, the collective experience of film as art renders it a wholly distinct leisure activity. The unique properties of attending the cinema can have decisively positive effects on mental health. Cinema attendance can have independent and robust effects on mental wellbeing because visual stimulation can queue a range of emotions and the collective experience of these emotions through

the cinema provides a safe environment in which to experience roles and emotions we might not otherwise be free to experience. The collective nature of the narrative and visual stimulation makes the experience enjoyable and controlled, thereby offering benefits beyond mere visual stimulation. Moreover, cinema is unique in that it is a highly accessible social art form, the participation in which generally cuts across economic lines. At the same time, attending the cinema allows for the exercise of personal preferences and the human need for distinction. In a nutshell, cinema attendance can be both a personally expressive experience, good fun, and therapeutic at the same time (Noah Uhrig, 2005)”. In a simple way, the author clearly brings out the cause and impact of cinema.

Cinema has been continuously striving to document emotions, feelings and experiences. From cave engravings to digital art the intense urge to retain visions and images, has resulted in human beings trying to preserve these feelings. This concept of ‘*Persistence of vision*’- an ability of the human brain to retain images for a brief period after they disappear from the field of vision (Kupsc Jarek, 2003), led man to hold on to images physically so that he could visit them as and when he wished.

Beginning with Zoetrope, a Grecian visual instrument, Auguste and Louis Lumiere in March 22 1895 who developed an apparatus called Cinematographe, which combined the functions of a movie camera, film printer and film projector no one then would have imagined the impact of cinema on the modern era. Inventions and innovations of Eadweard Muybridge, George Eastman, Thomas Alva Edison, Thomas Armat etc., coupled with entrepreneurial zeal of few set the ball rolling in the media world which is yet to stop.

Aided by science and technology cinema has become a medium for entertainment, business, dialogue, propaganda, education, religion, and culture. By recreating history, representing the present and ideating about the future, cinema has led and is leading men and women alike to a surreal world. Cinema means different things to people, if it is escapism for some; it is an experience of the untold, unheard and unseen visualizations to the uninitiated, uneducated or the ignorant. It has been the cheapest source of entertainment. Hence, it is no wonder with the world’s second largest population and also with more than 33% (The World Bank Report, 2013) living below the poverty line cinema in India becomes a clear favourite to escape from the daily grind and rigour of a hard and monotonous life. It should be no surprise that India today is the largest producer of movies.

History of *Kannada* Cinema

The inception of cinema in India began in 1913 with '*Raja Harishchandra*', a silent movie produced by Dada Saheb Phalke. Puttaswamy refers to cinema's loss of global identity once it embraced 'sound' as part of its continuous technological evolution. When the movie was silent it belonged to everybody the moment it began talking, the emergence of Talkies, cinema became cinema with varied histories (Puttaswamy, 2009). Hindi cinema presented its first talkies with '*Alam Ara*' in 1931, *Kannada* cinema soon followed it with its first talkie in 1934. In the initial years films produced in India were nothing but extensions of theatre productions which were recorded and presented. Such productions strove and survived on mythological stories.

Interestingly, the first *Kannada* movie '*VasanthaSena*' brought together noted literary figure T. P. Kailasam, well known cameraman Mohan Bavani of Central Film Divisions, G. K. Nanda, a Professor at University of Mysore, S.S. Narayana Shastri, a social activist, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, writer Ajjampura Sitaram, Journalist B.S. Rama Rao, D. K. Bharadwaj well known for his English-*Kannada* dictionary, art critic and painter G. Venkatachala and other intellectuals, artists and technologists. In fact, the synopsis of the movie was written by poet-writer James Cousins. It was for the first time that experts belonging to various fields of literature, music, education, theatre came together.

With such an auspicious beginning *Kannada* cinema did not look back. However, it had to wait for another four years for its first talkie production '*Sati Sulochana*'. Even this movie was not uneventful. It was a movie produced entirely outside Karnataka in Kolhapur and by non - *Kannadigas*. With such an eventful and fabulous beginning, *Kannada* cinema had to wait till 1954 to become an important and profitable industry. Between 1934 and 1954 the movies produced by *Kannada* film industry were only 40.

The reasons for this shortfall were several. Unlike *Hindi*, *Marathi*, *Tamil* and *Telugu* film industry *Kannada* industry was struggling with infancy and its attributes, was unable to cope with large scale funding requirements and lavishness associated with other industries. Besides, *Kannada* movies lacked innovations, as was the case with the others. The cinema watchers had to watch the same stories which they already had viewed as plays. They were not willing to see recorded presentations of already viewed theatre works. Added to that was Second World War and restrictions, both economic and political. Any depiction of Indian mythological or historical heroes was seen as anti-

national. And the biggest cause for concern was the fact that *Kannada* speaking areas were spread over other provinces, reducing *Kannada* speaking population to a minority except in the Princely state of Mysore. This resulted in the distribution problem and also brought a competition from other well established language movies.

The Birth of Stardom in *Kannada* Cinema

The year 1954 becomes extremely important for *Kannada* cinema as this became a turning point. The movie *Bedara Kannappa* starring S. P. MuthuRaj rechristened as Rajkumar by the film's producer Gubbi Veeranna was released. It was the movie version of a successful drama by the same name produced by one of the pillars of *Kannada* theatre, Gubbi Veeranna. He produced this movie under the banner of Karnataka Film Institute. The movie created box office history and gave the much needed boost to the ailing and struggling *Kannada* cinema. For once making movies in *Kannada* looked encouraging, profitable and sustainable. It also saw the emergence of a cine star in the form of Rajkumar, who for the next five decades would be the undisputed king of *Kannada* cinema.

Bedara Kannappa became a benchmark for devotional movies. It wasn't that there were no devotional movies before, but this movie gave a whole new dimension to the concept of common man's concept of devotion and accessibility to salvation. The story of a hunter belonging to a marginalized section of society, ostracized for no fault of his by a feudal, exploitative, discriminatory structured society, seeking the path to spiritual salvation despite numerous obstacles touched the raw nerve of the masses and elites alike. The movie as a protest against institutional religion and the triumph of an underdog set numerous precedents in terms of cinematic history of *Kannada* cinema. It was the first *Kannada* movie which ran successfully for 365 days. It won the first best regional film award instituted by the central government to encourage regional films, in the year 1954. It incorporated the then latest technology available. Also, it gave immense boost to the unification movement of Karnataka. Besides it was also the launching pad for Rajkumar as a cine star. Though he had honed his acting skills in Gubbi Veeranna's theatre troupe and was one of the main actors in an earlier movie titled '*Saptharishi*', it was the role of *Bedara Kannappa* which set the momentum towards his eventual stardom. Probably, neither Gubbi Veeranna nor Rajkumar knew that they were creating cinematic history. His growth became so phenomenal that Rajkumar is identified as *Kannada* Cinema and vice versa.

Hence, the creation and sustainability of Rajkumar as a superstar becomes all the more important. As Saibal Chatterjee says, creation of cinematic superstars, “*is an ongoing process, even lifelong process, a result of calculated risks and inspired artistic and business moves*” (Anil Saari, 2011). Further, he states that the popular clout of a megastar stems as much from the fictional characters that she or he portrays as from their perceived personal attributes. In understanding the rise and consolidation of Rajkumar not only as an actor par excellence but also the first mega star of *Kannada* film industry lies the secret behind understanding the same of Indian film industry.

Initiated into the world of theatre as a child artist for S. P Muthuraj, acting as a calling not by choice but a compulsion to saturate and shoulder family responsibilities. But even he would not have imagined that he would grow into an industry. His father too was a well known professional actor who made his living in Subbaiah Naidu and Gubbi Veeranna’s theatre troupes respectively. His younger brother and sister too tried their hands at acting but it was he, a fourth standard school dropout , with a soulful voice and impeccable acting skills, scrubbed, and refined by the world of night long drama enactments, who scaled unprecedented heights of cinematic glory. He was to set the standards for both acting skills and sustenance and consolidation of the mass adulation that followed him.

Here was a man who appealed to all classes, sections of our society irrespective of caste, religion, status, region, skilled, unskilled, gender, young or old. Though one sees the establishment of Vishnuvardhan in 1971 as a star in *NagaraHaavu*, who went on to act in 220 movies and considered as the second pillar of *Kannada* cinema after Dr Rajkumar, it was the latter whose appeal went beyond the old Mysore region. He showcased his acting talent in a wide variety of roles , be it devotional- *Bedara Kannappa, Bhakta Kanakadasa, Ohileshwara, Hari Bhaktha, Bhakta, Bhakta Chetha, Kabeera, Santha Thukaram, Sarvagna, Kaivara Narayanappa, Mantralaya Mahatme*; historical- *Ranadheera Kanteerva, Shri KrishnaDevaraya, Huliya Haalina mevu* mythological- *Mahishasura Mardini, Mohini Bhasmasura, Bookailasa, Bhakta Prahallada, Babhruvahana* or melodrama folk based movies- *Katari Veera, Rajadurgadha Rahasya, Veerakesari* and others.

Bangaradha Manushya broke box office records by running in major parts of Karnataka for nearly two long years. It inspired many educated youth to take up agriculture as a profession and contribute to nation building. *Anna Thangi, Mannina Maga, Mallammanna Pavada, Bhoodana, Punarjanma, Doorada Betta, Mayor Muttanna, Bangaradha Panjara, Sampathige Savaal, Rayara Sose* and followed by *Karuneye Kutumbada Kannu, Kulavadhu, Gaaligopura, Bangaradha Hoovu,*

Naandi, Uyyale, Kasturi Nivasa, Eradu Kanasu are memorable movies which will assure a successful rerun if released even today. In simple terms, he was to excel in any genre.

He brought in his own method of acting which was subtle yet impactful unlike the melodramatic styles of the well established stars. He brought in a style which suited the sentiments and culture of *Kannadigas*. He aroused patriotic passions, espoused family values, stirred emotions, showed many a wayward youth the right path, helped correct mistakes of elders, inspired people to modify their wrongs into right, wove the magic web of surreal, respected women, wooed and loved women in a dignified way. In all, he has been an epitome of an ideal son, brother, lover, husband, father, saint, king and citizen in the roles depicted. He has been a classic example of ‘how one should be’. Different genres meant different sections of society too. Here was one mass Icon who was generating audience. He was making inroads into the rural audience, which mattered for numbers and sustenance of hero worship.

Construction of Identity of Rajkumar

Weren’t MGR and NTR the same? If not what makes Dr. Rajkumar stand apart? What were the factors behind his allure and endurance which hold sway even today?

“It is not enough if you are a good man, you must create an image that you are a good man. Every man must have an image. Take Nagi Reddi or S.S. Vasan or myself. Each of us has a distinct image. The image is what immediately strikes you when you see a person or hear his name. You put forward an image of yourself if you want to get anywhere” so said M.G. Ramchandran (Vaasanthi, 2006).

M.G.R’s appeal with the subaltern classes was based on a carefully created and crafted image both on screen and off screen, of that of a marginalized underdog who grows powerful enough to dispense justice to the oppressed sections of society. The subaltern identified him with heroes existing in their folklore narratives. He exploited this very image for his political advantage.

M.G.R, Karunannidhi and later J.Jayalalitha who claimed to be the heir apparent to M.G.R’s ideology, utilized *Dravidian* movement and its anti-*Brahmin*, anti-*Hindi* manifesto to build their political legacy. Similarly, N. T. Rama Rao played to the gallery with his numerous successful performances of religious and mythological heroes, instantly connecting to the masses that for long had to bear the brunt of Nizam’s reign, with Urdu being regarded as an elitist language. So, if it was *Tamil* and *Dravidian* momentum in Tamil Nadu cinema and politics, it was *Hindu* religion and Telugu in Andhra Pradesh. As Raghavendra says ‘*the ideological hero therefore came out of a*

politically polarized milieu in which mass mobilization had taken place and adversaries identified'
(M.K.Raghavendra, 2011.)

Rajkumar had no known historical enemies to slay or an excessively oppressive system to demolish and claim the status of a savior and a hero. Mysore was a princely state known for its benevolent administration. In fact, it was considered a model state even by Mahatma Gandhi. So Rajkumar was to be the 'ethical hero', sans any political ideology, someone who could be identified with everybody, belonging to any strata, religion, or caste. Hence, it was acting alone upon which he had to build his stardom. He was natural when it came to acting, he was fortunate enough to have a mentor and guide in his father, Singanallur Puttaswamiah. He was a product of theatre which nurtured and refined him. His impeccable voice complimented his acting. But it was his family, especially his wife and brother, who created the brand of a conscientious hero by choosing literary works as stories for his movies and also got to produce, market and distribute them. His family made sure that he focused only on acting and singing.

His family's first film production was his 21st picture *Trimurti* under the banner of Poornima enterprises. This was to counter the allegations that he as a star who interfered in movie making. Parvatamma's step to protest this resulted in the establishment of one of the most powerful production houses in the *Kannada* film industry. Subsequently, the next logical step was to get into distribution to check the problems associated with distribution, mainly monopoly, lower purchasing rates in old Mysore region and more so in the Hubli area. It was not that *Kannada* movie industry was chaotic or unorganized since its inception, It would be surprising for many to know that one of the most important theatre companies, Gubbi Veeranna's, which heralded the growth of both theatre and cinema had a corporate structure and approach to its organization and functioning. For example whether a lead actor, singer, director or the spot boy, everybody received their salaries on a weekly basis. Sharp business acumen and an in depth understanding of the working of movie industry led the Rajkumar family to initiate qualitative changes in production and distribution of *Kannada* movies. These resulted in tremendous generation of revenue. For example, A group called *Rajkumar Unity* set up by the family, set in the strongly opposed norm that the star's movies should not be released simultaneously. This was at a time when 10 - 15 movies of Rajkumar would be released in a year. There were numerous instances where in at least three movies of the star were released in one go. Besides, another important norm that the group followed was that there has to be a gap of minimum 6 weeks between the release of one movie and another. Also, they brought the norm of prioritizing

releases on the basis of completion. These significant management changes ushered in an organized system in a much confused and chaotic industry. The result was not only beneficial to Rajkumar but also to the movie industry.

Another significant contribution of this production and distribution has been the introduction of the best of *Kannada* literary works and poetry to the *Kannada* subaltern by their cinematic reproductions. Further, a technological innovation 'known as dubbing' saw its genesis in *Kannada* industry in 1943, turned out to be bane as it literally squeezed the industry in the 1950s. The *Kannada* movies were not able to compete with the flood of dubbed versions of *Tamil*, *Telugu*, *Marathi*, *Malayalam* and *Hindi* movies. Protest against it was weak as there were those who supported it saying that it gave employment to technicians, dubbing artists, writers and gave an opportunity to *Kannadigas* to see lavish and rich movies which could not be produced otherwise. It was during these trying times that Rajkumar gave a momentum to the protest movement by voicing his support against dubbing and vowed only to act in *Kannada* movies.

Since 1960s *Kannada* cinema saw immense growth in terms of market and revenue. There can be no doubt as to who the chief contributor to this development was. Between 1934 and 1961 the number of movies produced in *Kannada* was 131 but in the next 10 years it reached 370 out of which he had acted in 117, totaling a number of 121 movies (K. Puttaswamy, 2009).

It is no sheer coincidence that Rajkumar reached out as a mobilizing factor for the unification of Karnataka in the 1950s, a movement started by literary and cultural leaders. Cinema was able to reach out to the widely dispersed *Kannada* speaking populace. He became the cultural symbol representing the *Kannada* language. If unification movement unified a territory on the basis of language, *Kannada* movies, especially Rajkumar's which were largely cinematic versions of culturally accepted mythologies and popular literature, became a platform for *Kannada* which was non-existent earlier. As stated earlier, the entry of sound, the language as a medium of expression gave a whole new dimension to cinematic narratives, culture and history. In the process of identification with and glorification of shared region, culture, history, *Kannada* became the common, collective factor with cinema infusing visual images for people to foster a sense of oneness. His role in seeking funds during the severe famine of 1961 showed the depth of acceptance and reverence of him by the masses. This was one instance where the artists were looked upon with admiration.

Here was somebody who appealed most to the lesser educated middle class and lower sections of society by the projection of values, ideals, aspirations, desires and dreams in the most commonsensical way. It was another fact that *Kannada* and *Kannada* cinema were looked down upon much by the then press and the elite. It was not until the Gokak movement of 1982 that the intelligentsia realized the mass adulation and appeal of the cine star cutting across the populace. The entry of Rajkumar kick started the dormant movement to a statewide protest seeking the enactment of *Kannada* as the medium of instruction for education in schools, until then the movement was confined to a few protests and petitions to the negligent state government.

Gradually, one sees the evolution of a least educated, rural, backward caste man becoming the symbol of *Kannada*, the cultural icon, the identity of *Kannada* cinema and an undisputed people's leader even though he shunned politics. He not being politically inclined was perhaps one of the major reasons as to why he was held in high esteem by a large number of people. The crest of popularity and iconic status intrigued even the star himself, who was supposedly one of the simplest, humble and down to earth. From wanting a decent education and grammar to being revered as a symbol of *Kannada* language must have humoured the star.

Nevertheless, if cinema created a legend, the legendary status also thrust a representative role upon him which he was unable to shed off. Recollecting his kidnapping by Veerappan, the forest brigand, he shared his inner turmoil with Nedumaran, the Tamil journalist and mediator, about him being a family man and how acting was his vocation, with his world consisting of his children and having least knowledge of the external world (Ganapathi, 2006).

The impact of his death resulted in large scale shut downs and disturbances. It was a way for his adulators, fans to vent out their frustration and anger on the loss of their Hero, apart from the fact that trouble mongers made the best of the chaos. It was a clear indicator that he was not being identified with cinema industry but was also the symbol of *Kannada* and Karnataka.

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